

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

MARIAS RIVER STATE PARK & WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

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PART 1.0 - SITE DESIGNATION AND ADMINISTRATION

PART 2.0 - VISION STATEMENT

PART 3.0 - PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS PLAN

PART 4.0 - PUBLIC RESOURCE VALUES

PART 5.0 - NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

PART 6.0 - HERITAGE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

PART 7.0 - RECREATIONAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

PART 8.0 - ADMINISTRATION, OPERATIONS, AND MAINTENANCE

PART 9.0 - CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 1.0 SITE DESIGNATION AND ADMINISTRATION

1.1: Introduction

Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area (MRSPWMA) was established in 2008 as a combination State Park and Wildlife Management Area jointly administered and managed by the Region 4 Wildlife and Parks Divisions of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP).

This is a preliminary plan that FWP will use in the interim until a final management plan can be developed over the next 24 months. Any final management plan will be the result of a public process including public meetings, an Environmental Assessment process with opportunity for public input, and discussion with neighboring property owners.

Equal portions of the land and water base areas of the MRSPWMA will be designated State Park and WMA. Managerial responsibilities and objectives will be fully integrated within FWP's State Park and Wildlife programs.

1.2: Authority

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) undertakes this action by authority of MCA 23-1-102, defining FWP powers and duties regarding the acquisition of lands by fee or donation as state historical sites and recreation areas. The department may cooperate with other federal, state or local agencies to acquire, plan, establish, and maintain parks as authorized by MCA 23-1-107.

FWP is authorized by Section 87-1-209 to acquire lands by purchase, gift, or other agreement, or acquire easements upon lands or waters for certain purposes, including public fishing and outdoor recreation.

The FWP Commission endorsed FWP's proposed "course of action" to pursue acquisition of the property on April 26, 2007.

FWP commission will make a final determination on aquasition at their first meeting following the acceptance of a bid/purchase price by the Lincoln Estate representatives.

The Montana Land Board must approved FWP acquisition of this property in fee title.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

1.3: Management Responsibilities:

Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area will be divided into two distinct areas of management and responsibility:

- a) **State Park:** The following responsibilities will be managed and administered by the Parks Division:
 - Recreational visitor use management of water and ground based resources;
 - Identification, protection, and interpretation of cultural, paleontological, archeological, historical, prehistoric, and geological resources.
 - Visitor contact and information facilities at the primary park portal
 - Vehicle accessible “front-country” and river based campgrounds.
- b) **Wildlife Management:** The following responsibilities will be managed and administered by the Wildlife Division:
 - Natural, biological, and wildlife resource;
 - Wildlife species and habitat enhancement;
 - Hunting access, management, and regulations.

PART 2.0 VISION STATEMENT

In the next 10 years, Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area will develop into a destination for Montana residents and visitors. The site will provide an equal opportunity for both consumptive and non-consumptive recreationalist to enjoy this public resource. Diverse outdoor recreational opportunities provided at the site include but are not limited to hunting, fishing, river floating, hiking, camping, trail riding, mountain biking, wildlife watching, photography, natural and cultural history discovery and education.

A central component of the site will be the preservation and enhancement of habitat for big game, upland game birds, and waterfowl. Special emphasis will be placed on preserving the relatively undisturbed riparian vegetation along the free flowing Marias River. A balance between visitors needs and healthy resources will be emphasized.

Respect for neighboring landowners, public use, and resource management objectives within the boundaries of the Marias River State Park and WMA will be considered as FWP make decisions regarding activities in the Park and WMA.

Facilities will be developed to enhance the visitor experience, including signs, road improvements, parking areas, comfort stations, camping areas, visitor contact station, trails, and exhibits. These improvements will lead to an increase in visitation to the site. Park management infrastructure will be developed to provide the resources necessary to accomplish park and WMA goals, provide for site stewardship, protect natural and cultural resources, and support a safe, comfortable, and educational visitor experience.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 3.0 PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THIS PLAN

The purpose of this plan is to provide general management direction for the State Park/WMA during the initial stages of site management and development. Specific management actions associated with highly sensitive, controversial, or complex issues may warrant the development of issue specific “implementation plans” that would fall under the umbrella of this plan.

The “lifespan” of a final plan is expected to last approximately 10 years. As the Park/WMA evolves, an updated plan may be warranted.

PART 4.0 PUBLIC RESOURCE VALUES

4.1: Fish

The Marias River upstream from Interstate 15 is known to have populations of walleye, burbot, northern pike, rainbow trout and perch. Fishing with rod and reel and setlines is common along this stretch of river.

4.2: Wildlife

Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area (MRSPWMA) provides public opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting and trapping. Mule deer, white-tailed deer, antelope, turkey, sharptail grouse, pheasant, Hungarian partridge, numerous waterfowl species, bobcat, coyote, beaver, mink, otter and muskrat are all present on the property in harvestable numbers. Non-game birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians are locally abundant, as are raptors and several species of owls. The juxtaposition, number of habitat types and size of this property contributes to the overall quality of the wildlife resource.

4.3: Vegetation

MRSPWMA is mostly native vegetation, with some small tracts of farmland that have been re-seeded to introduced grasses, such as smooth brome and crested wheatgrass.

Upland benches and hills adjacent to the river are made up of combinations of warm and cool season forbs and grasses, for example, western wheatgrass, prairie junegrass, green needlegrass, blue grama, phlox, fringed sagewort and rose.

Sagebrush, chokecherry, snowberry, rose and the above-mentioned grasses are common on terraces and openings adjacent to the river. Some of the open areas in cottonwood and willow bottoms adjacent to the Marias River were plowed up at one time and planted to hay and grain. These areas are now overgrown with smooth brome and noxious weeds.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

The riparian zone consists of older cottonwood gallery forest interspersed with assorted willows, chokecherry, buffaloberry and younger cottonwood stands on wet oxbows and exposed sand bars.

A variety of noxious weeds are found along the Marias River and associated coulees, including Russian knapweed, spotted knapweed, leafy spurge, Canada thistle, and musk thistle.

4.4: Heritage Resources

The Marias River corridor represents an important cultural landscape where indigenous peoples have traveled, camped and subsisted for centuries. In 1806 Meriwether Lewis and four members of the Lewis & Clark Expedition traveled up the Marias River drainage to explore its upper reaches. The only armed conflict with Native Americans occurred about 30 miles upstream on the Two Medicine River, resulting in the death of two Blackfeet men.

The specific type and extent of cultural resources and artifacts are unknown at present, but it's highly likely that the property has a rich assemblage of cultural resources.

4.5: Geological & Paleontological Resources

There is a strong possibility that the property contains geological and paleontological resources of scientific and educationally significant importance. FWP will locate, identify and protect and interpret these resources.

4.6: Recreation Resources

Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area provides outstanding opportunities for a wide range of non-motorized outdoor recreational activities. The backdrop for these activities is a relatively pristine and highly scenic river valley with important natural, cultural resources attributes.

This site provides outstanding opportunities for river floating, camping, angling, hunting, hiking, photography, horseback riding, mountain biking, bird watching, and other outdoor endeavors.

FWP currently does not have any major recreational sites or facilities in the northern tier of Region 4. It is anticipated that this site would provide a coveted recreational destination for residents of the "High Line" communities of North-Central Montana.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

4.7: Aesthetic Resources

The site provides a strong sense of place with many aesthetic values important the spiritual and mental health, welfare and morale of Montanans. Specific attributes include but are not limited to the free flowing Marias River, open space, scenic view shed, natural quiet, clean air, and historic landscape.

4.8: Neighboring Properties

Public use, FWP management, and resources found throughout the property will have potential affects to neighboring property owners and the local communities. FWP will work with neighbors and the communities near the property to keep undesirable affect to a minimum and to enhance positive benefits to all. Issues related to weed control, trespass, county tax base, wildlife management, compatible uses, agriculture, recreational users experiences, tourism and economic benefits to the local communities are a partial list of issues to be addressed.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 5.0 NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

5.1: Vegetation Management

Desired Conditions: To utilize livestock grazing, weed control measures and long-term vegetation trend monitoring as tools to promote healthy, viable native plant communities.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop livestock grazing plan to enhance grassland community vitality
 - rotational rest grazing system
 - season of grazing
 - class of livestock
 - fencing – boundary and interior, electric/barbed wire?
 - vegetation monitoring – utilization, range condition, trend
 - water development/ water lanes
 - grazing lease stipulations
 - assessment of fire danger and develop fire prevention measures
- b) Install boundary fencing for livestock grazing and delineation for recreational users to prevent trespass.
- c) Implement vegetation trend monitoring – grassland and shrub/tree communities
 - photo plots
 - utilization surveys
 - cover plots/transects
- d) Implement treatment of abandoned/reseeded farmland
 - food plots – annual grains
 - legume plantings to attract deer, etc.
 - weed control
 - mowing/grazing/harvesting

5.2: Noxious Weed management

Desired Conditions: To keep introduced noxious weeds controlled to prevent loss of native species and decline in plant community productivity.

Management Strategies:

- a) Coordinate with county weed districts
- b) Formulate long-term weed management plan with monitoring
- c) Implement chemical and biological control measures
- d) Control weeds aggressively

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

- e) Work with neighboring land owners on control efforts beyond property boundary to provide area wide weed reduction, control, and reduce spread

5.3: Wildlife Management

Desired Conditions: To maintain healthy wildlife populations for use and enjoyment by the public.

Management Strategies:

- a) Establish trend surveys for big game, furbearers and upland birds
 - aerial trend surveys – big game
 - ground surveys – big game
 - snow track surveys – furbearers
 - lek counts – sharptailed grouse
 - crowing counts – pheasants
 - beaver cache counts
- b) Establish trend surveys for non-game species
 - Implement raptor surveys
 - Implement songbird counts/banding operations
 - Implement bat surveys
- c) Design and implement public access plan
 - mode of travel delineated– non-motorized
 - timing of public use – hunting season, winter-spring closures, etc.
 - regulate hunter numbers with a block management type reservation or schedule system.
 - educate users to property boundaries and prevent trespass on surrounding private lands
 - monitor and prevent trespass and entry through private property

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 6.0 HERITAGE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

6.1: Heritage Resource Protection

Desired Conditions: Heritage resources will be protected and interpreted as an integral part of the State Park and WMA landscape.

Management Strategies:

- a) Conduct a compliance level inventory of heritage resources located on the property.
- b) Consult with the State Historic Preservation office for all undertakings with potential to disturb heritage resources.
- c) Educate the public about the importance of leaving heritage resources undisturbed for future generations.
- d) Interpret the sites cultural resources through sensitive and appropriate displays, programs, and information.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 7.0 RECREATION MANAGEMENT

7.1: Recreational Opportunities

Desired Condition: Outstanding opportunities will be provided for a diverse range of outdoor recreational opportunities.

Management Strategies:

- a) Appropriate recreational user (consumptive and non-consumptive) will have an equal opportunity to enjoy this public resource.
- b) Public access will be regulated year-round.
- c) Vehicle accessible to appropriate areas and backcountry camping opportunities will be provided.
- d) Access to the Marias River waterway will be provided to facilitate river recreation.

7.2: Public Access

Desired Condition: Public access via vehicle and non-motorized travel will be provided at appropriate and strategic locations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage the site for day use only until adequate operations funding and staffing can be secured to ensure site stewardship.
- b) Design and implement public access plan consistent with wildlife management objectives.
- c) Develop a primary entrance with vehicle access near the eastern (downstream) entrance to the site.
- d) Develop a non-motorized watercraft put-in at the Sullivan Bridge area located upstream of the western boundary of the site.
- e) Develop a non-motorized watercraft take-out and put-in near the eastern site entrance and campground area.
- f) Restrict vehicle access to primary and secondary access locations, parking areas, and front country campground.
- g) Prohibit OHV use throughout the site.
- h) Sign and fence property boundary as funds become available

7.3: Public Use Regulations

Desired Condition: Public use regulations will be established, posted, and enforced in a manner that protects public safety and prevents damage or degradation to natural, cultural, or recreational resources.

Management Strategy:

- a) Evaluate existing ARM Rules pertinent to State Parks and Wildlife Management Areas and determine specific authority for public use regulations.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

- b) Discharge of firearms and weapons will be restricted to lawful hunting only. Recreational shooting will be prohibited (ARM 12.8.202).
- c) Pets must be leashed at all times, with the exception of trained dogs used for bird hunting. At all times, dogs must be under the control of their owner (ARM 12.8.203).
- d) Recreational livestock such as pack and saddle animals will be restricted to designated trails and campsites only. Horse riders must accompany horses at all times. Horse grazing will be prohibited. Weed seed-free feed required (ARM 12.8.203).
- e) Motorized vehicles will be restricted to designated road and parking areas. OHV Use will be prohibited (ARM 12.8.204).
- f) Camping will be permitted in designated sites only (ARM 12.8.205).
- g) Campfires will be permitted in designated steel fire grates only (12.8.206).
- h) Gathering or cutting firewood for off-site use will be prohibited (12.8.207).
- i) Removal of natural, geological, historical archeological property will be prohibited except for berries, fallen dead wood, or lawfully taken fish and game (12.8.207).
- j) Commercial use will require a permit in accordance with the Statewide Commercial Use Rules (ARM 12.14.101-170).

7.4: Marketing

Desired Condition: The site will be promoted as a unique public resource and integral part of Montana's State Park and Wildlife Management Area system.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a site specific website on the FWP home page.
- b) Develop a site-specific brochure including a map, resource information, recreational opportunities, and regulations.
- c) Work with MDOT to install a "Marias River State Park and Wildlife Management Area" sign on Interstate # 15.
- d) Install appropriate site designation signs at primary access points.

7.5: Camping

Desired Condition: Overnight camping opportunities will be available on a year-round basis in both a front-country and backcountry recreational setting.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a vehicle accessible "front country" fee campground near the east (downstream) entrance to the site.
- b) Develop an appropriate number and distribution of designated "backcountry" campsites along the river corridor accessible to river floaters.

7.6: River Recreation

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Desired Condition: Outstanding opportunities for floating on the Marias River will be available to the public.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a specific river recreation program implementation plan, including identification of a river recreation carrying capacity and establishment of indicators and standards for high quality social and resource conditions related to river recreation.
- b) Evaluate the options/potential for a river floating allocation, permit, and fee system.
- c) Promulgate a specific ARM rule that prohibits motorized watercraft on the Marias River from Sullivan Bridge to Interstate 15.
- d) Establish a seasonal river ranger position and river patrol program

7.7: Trails

Desired Condition: Hiking, stock, and mountain bike trails will be developed for public use if suitable locations and trail alignments can be found that do not adversely impact soils, natural features, wildlife, fisheries, and cultural resources.

Management Strategy:

- a) Evaluate potential trail locations, alignments, routes, and destinations.
- b) Design and construct a trail system if appropriate locations can be located.
- c) Develop and implement trail maintenance and signing standards.
- d) Restrict stock use to designated trails or routes.
- e) Limit overnight stock use to designated areas in the front country campground.
- f) Require weed seed free feed for all overnight stock users.

7.8: Sport Hunting

Desired Condition: Outstanding opportunities for sport hunting will be available to the public in accordance with existing hunting districts and regulations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage sport hunting in accordance with current and regulations.
- b) Implement a hunting access system that allows FWP to monitor and regulate hunting activity and establish conditions that allow hunters and non-hunters to safely share recreational resources.
- c) Establish no hunting safety zones around the front country campground and designated boat camps.

7.9: Angling

Desired Condition: Opportunities for angling in the Marias River will be available in accordance with existing creel limits and fishing regulations.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

Management Strategies:

- a) Promote appropriate fishing etiquette and catch and release techniques
- b) Develop watercraft and foot portals to facilitate access to fishing waters.

7.10: Education and Interpretation

Desired Condition: Montana State Parks will develop educational and interpretive media and services that tell the story of the area's natural, cultural, and recreational resources.

Management Strategy:

- a) Develop appropriate educational and interpretive themes consistent with park values and resources.
- b) Install a standard State Park informational kiosk at the primary site entrance.
- c) Develop on site park naturalist interpretive hikes and programs.
- d) Provide detailed information regarding the area's natural, cultural, geological, and recreational resources on the FWP home page.

7.11: Commercial Use

Desired Condition: Commercial use will be approved if deemed a necessary and appropriate service for the public enjoyment and use of the site.

Management Strategy:

- a) Develop a commercial use plan with criteria for evaluating commercial use requests.
- b) Permit approved commercial use requests in accordance with the FWP Commercial Use Rule and Commercial Use Fee Rule (ARM 12.14.101-170).

7.12: Public Safety

Desired Condition: Visitors exposure to hazards and safety risks will be minimized through progressive risk management initiatives on the site.

Management Strategy:

- a) Develop an Emergency Operations and Response Plan that promotes a proactive approach to public safety.
- b) Provide an adequate law enforcement patrol and response presence on the site through the use of Game Wardens and Ex-officio Wardens.
- c) Develop appropriate signage, regulatory postings, and educational messages related to public safety.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 8.0 ADMINISTRATION, OPERATIONS, & MAINTENANCE

Desired Condition: Funding and staffing will be secured to properly support site administration, operations, maintenance, and stewardship.

Management Strategy:

- a) Develop a strategy to provide an interim site presence capable of providing basic site stewardship while funding and FTE to administer the site is being pursued.
- b) Pursue adequate operations funding and staffing to provide adequate site stewardship, administration, and visitor use management.
- c) Within the first 5 years of operation, securing funding and FTE to support an on site Manager.
- d) Establish the following functional assignments and responsibilities consistent with the FWP Parks and Wildlife Division's joint management of the site:

Parks Division	Wildlife Division	Shared
Visitor Use & Recreation Management	Wildlife Management	Noxious Weed Control
Interpretive Programs & Exhibits	Habitat Restoration and Enhancement	Boundary and Grazing Allotment Fencing
Public Facility Maintenance	Agricultural Plots	Access & Boundary Signing
Emergency Operations & Law Enforcement	Grazing Management	
Public Safety & Risk Management	Hunting Management	

PART 9.0 CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Desired Condition: FWP will strive to secure capital funding for public facilities and amenities that enhance the visitor experience.

Management Strategy:

- a) Develop a concept plan for proposed park facilities, including access roads, parking areas, signs, exhibits, comfort stations, vehicle campground, boat camps, trails, river access sites, and primary visitor contact station.
- b) Establish priorities for the phased development of facilities and amenities.
- c) Consult with the State Historical Preservation Office prior to engaging in ground disturbing construction or capital improvement projects
- d) Implement a NEPA compliance process for all major actions including ground disturbing construction or capital improvement projects.